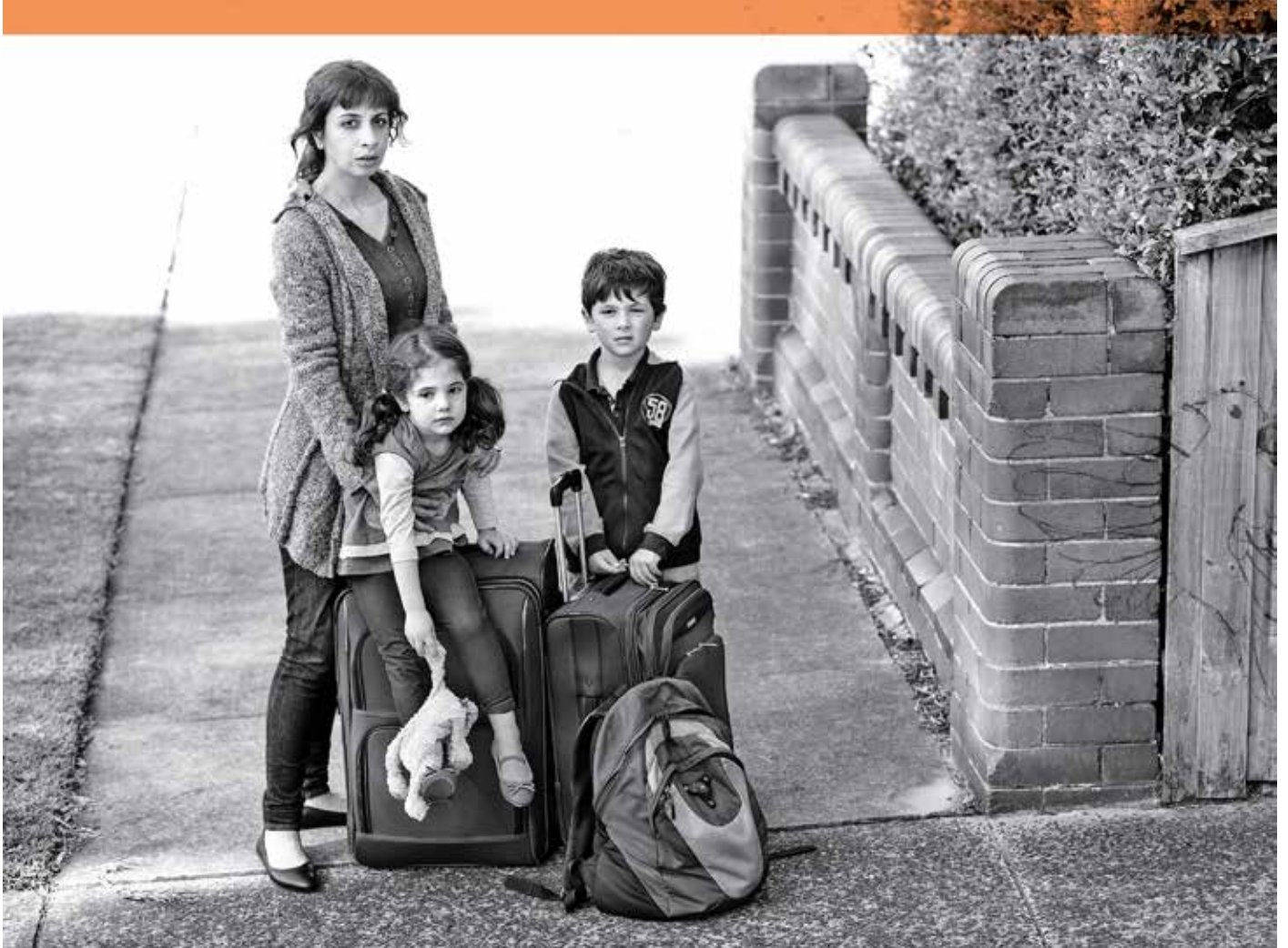# The Wesley Report

Homelessness and the next generation

'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.'

Mission

Honouring God, serving people, building hope

Media enquiries

Media enquiries about this report should be directed to the Public Affairs Manager, Wesley Mission, on (02) 9263 5350.

Foreword

The impact of long-term homelessness on children and young people is profound but too often neglected. Little do we hear their voice apart from their immediate cry for help. While this latest Wesley Mission report is our fourth study on homelessness, its qualitative focus specifically takes us to the issues at the heart of family breakdown and homelessness.

Those who work alongside homeless families or families who are at risk of homelessness see the lasting consequences of not only insecure housing but a lack of enduring and appropriate support services. Domestic violence and family breakdown too often set families adrift on the streets or into emergency shelters. Sadly, for too many women, children and young people this unstable and unfamiliar scenario is far safer than staying at home.

Wesley Mission staff have seen a seismic shift in the face of homelessness—from an experience largely defined by single, older men to one where women, families and children are now a sizeable representation. If we are to adequately address the major issues, it is their voices and concerns which need to inform service delivery and policy reform.

To this end, Wesley Mission engaged research group Urbis to conduct a series of qualitative interviews in order to report on the current experiences of homeless mothers and their children, as well as the longitudinal experiences of those who had experienced homelessness as a child. The Wesley Report is designed to be a concise voice of client experiences which provides a collective base for discussions for policy and practice recommendations.
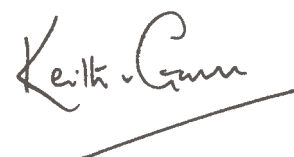
As you will read, it is clear that many homeless people do not consider their homes to be safe and that there is a long-term impact on the lives of those who have experienced homelessness as a child. Moreover, homeless people value the provision of services that serve more than just their immediate need.

It is vitally important that homeless families get speedy and easy access to stable housing. It is also necessary that governments build more appropriate housing designed for families. The benefits of stable housing must never be underestimated—it acts as a circuit-breaker giving families time to think clearly about their future, free from insecurity and fear.

Families also need tailored support services to not only help them through the crisis but provide a foothold for the future. Appropriate support builds resilience in children who can all too easily withdraw from relationships, disengage from learning and employment, lose trust, and learn behaviours which can cause them to relapse into homelessness later in life.

I would like to thank representatives from the community services sector and the NSW Government who participated in Wesley Mission's policy and practice forum and for the families who openly shared their experiences and views. The recommendations of this report will provide a platform for the changes needed to address the growing issue of family, child and youth homelessness and the implementation of prevention strategies to break the cycle of homelessness.

At Wesley Mission we seek to build upon and develop new models of caring for the homeless families and to work at enduring, long-term solutions, so that wellbeing is translated to independent living and to fulfilling and sustainable relationships which make for healthy communities. We are driven by a conviction that all people have a God-given dignity and purpose. The Wesley Report underlines this conviction, now and for the future.

The Rev Dr Keith V Garner
CEO/Superintendent
Wesley Mission

Executive summary

The sad truth is that for many young families, becoming homeless is safer than remaining at home. Of equal concern is the potential long-term and generational impacts of even a single night on the streets. In order to learn more about these factors, we interviewed a broad range of individuals, all of whom had experienced, either directly or indirectly, homelessness as a child.

Key findings

For many, homelessness is the safer alternative

We discovered that an ongoing and significant contributing factor to homelessness is abuse around the home. This physical abuse frequently leads to family breakdown, separation, and women and children being forced out of the home in search of respite and safety. Backing up these findings were homelessness surveys that reported 34 per cent of clients nationwide were seeking homelessness support as a result of domestic violence.

There are long-term and generational factors leading to homelessness

There is now strong evidence to suggest that people who experience homelessness as a child are more likely to revert to patterns of homelessness. For these individuals, homelessness becomes a learned behaviour, one that can be passed on through several generations. In fact, almost half (48 per cent) of all respondents to the Intergenerational Homelessness Survey reported that their parents were also homeless at some point (Flatau et. al., 2013; 2).

The value of supported accommodation goes beyond short-term comfort

This report also discovered that the accommodation offered by support services has had a profound effect on the lives of those in need. Beyond the physical need of shelter, it has the power to give homeless individuals the opportunity to 'stop and pause.' In other words, by offering them respite from concern about their immediate survival, many individuals were able to reassess their situation, search for work, or find an appropriate place to rent.

Research recommendations

The conclusions of our research have pointed to four main recommendations for homeless service providers:

- we recommend that homeless services recognise the broad spectrum of different needs that exist for homeless families and individuals. Thus, services can be tailored to meet those different needs
- homeless services should not underestimate the importance of building trust with their clients. Due to past experiences, many clients will have trust issues, making it essential to go the extra mile
- homeless services should co-operate with the community to improve both the integration and feelings of belonging between the clients and society
- homeless families should have access to appropriate social housing—accommodation that is more than just a 'place to stay', but rather, offers a chance to 'stop and pause.'

Background

In December 2008, the government released the White Paper on Homelessness, *The Road Home* (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs). A critical finding from this report was that while national homelessness figures have remained relatively stable over the last decade, the number of homeless children, families and older people has increased. In response to this finding, the government released *the National Homelessness Research Agenda 2009–2013.* With this document, the government set out the national priorities for new research that would form part of a whole-of-government response to the issue of homelessness. The Agenda's research priorities and objectives identified a need for more data about homelessness and, specifically, more data on the lifelong consequences and intergenerational issues surrounding homelessness.

To better understand this growing problem, Wesley Mission commissioned Urbis to undertake research on the experiences of homelessness for families and young people in Australia. This, the 11th Wesley Report since 2006, is designed to provide experiential insight to understand the issues and concerns that homeless families face, and to provide context to some of the emerging quantitative and longitudinal data which has been published on homelessness in Australia (most recently the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) analysis of the 2012 Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) and the Melbourne Institute's analysis of intergenerational homelessness published in February 2013). It is important to note that this study is not intended as a comprehensive assessment of the impact of outcomes as a result of service access. Nor is it intended to provide a comprehensive review of the longitudinal impacts of homelessness.

The specific aims of the research are to understand:

- the experience of homelessness for families
- the experience of homelessness for younger people (those aged under 16 years)
- the longer-term impact of childhood homelessness on both adult homelessness and broader impacts on later life.

The data-gathering process

This study comprised three separate stages:

Stage one

A review of relevant Australian literature on the experience of homelessness for mothers and their children, including an assessment of the evidence for intergenerational impacts of homelessness.

Stage two

Qualitative research with:
- mothers who were currently homeless
- individuals who had experienced an episode of homelessness while under the age of 16

Stage three

A policy and practice workshop with Wesley Mission, New South Wales government and Non-Government Organisation (NGO) representatives.

Stage one
Literature review

The literature review was summative in nature and was aimed at understanding current Australian and international literature on the topic of homelessness. The primary focus was on literature produced within the last decade.

The review focused on gaining an understanding of:
- homelessness support in Australia
- the impact of family homelessness on children
- the cyclical dimension of homeless families
- the longer-term impact of homelessness on children

See Appendix A for a summary of the review.

Stage two
Wesley Mission research

The second stage of the research involved interviews with people who had experienced homelessness. The focus of this stage was to understand the impacts of homelessness on families and children while exploring the longer-term impact of homelessness on children.

A total of 22 participants were interviewed as part of the qualitative research. All were recruited by Wesley Mission staff. The interviews were conducted at Wesley Mission sites in Greater Sydney (Gosford) and inner-city Sydney (Surry Hills). All interviews took place in mid-January 2013 and each interview lasted approximately one hour. Where appropriate, or requested, a Wesley Mission case worker was present during the interviews.

All participants had experienced homelessness as a child (under 16 years of age), including those interviewed as homeless mothers.

Table 1 provides the details of the final sample.

Table 1: Final sample profile

Cohort	Numbers of participants
Gender (22 in total)	16 females
	6 males
Parents (10 in total)	8 mothers
	2 fathers
Age (22 in total)	17–20 years: 6 participants
	21–30 years: 9 participants
	31–40 years: 2 participants
	40+ years: 5 participants

Stage three
Policy and practice workshop

After completion of the interviews with clients, Urbis and Wesley Mission organised a policy and practice workshop with key stakeholders who provided homelessness services and support.

The aims of the workshop were threefold:
- to review and discuss the key findings of Stage 1 (literature review) and Stage 2 (interviews with clients) of the research project
- to focus on identifying practical outcomes and ideas to address the impact of homelessness on families (in particular women and children) and its longer-term impacts
- to explore implications for government policy.

Alongside Wesley Mission service workers, representatives from the following homelessness service providers participated in the workshop:
- Homelessness NSW
- The Salvation Army
- Mission Australia
- The Haymarket Foundation
- NSW Department of Family and Community Services (NSW FaCS)

Definition of homelessness

There are many ways in which homelessness can be defined. The concept is often broadened to include not only people who are sleeping rough in public areas but also to those living in temporary accommodation, those who are staying with friends and families and those who are receiving specialist homelessness services in substandard boarding houses (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), 2008).

Reviewing definitions of homelessness as outlined in the available literature, this research project takes as broad a view of homelessness as possible, defining homelessness beyond the more basic 'no fixed abode' definition to reflect those who may be accommodated in insecure situations. The figure below provides this definition in detail.

Figure 1: Definition of homelessness (adapted from ABS, 2012)

An individual is considered 'homeless' if the individual's housing situation is any of the following:

- dwelling type is caravan, tent, cabin, boat, improvised building/dwelling/no dwelling/street/park/in the open, motor vehicle, boarding/rooming house, emergency accommodation, or hotel/motel/bed and breakfast

- dwelling type is house/townhouse/flat and condition of occupancy is 'couch surfing'

- dwelling type is house/townhouse/flat and tenure type is 'no tenure' and conditions of occupancy are not 'couch surfing'

- tenure type is renting or living rent-free in transitional housing, caravan park, boarding/rooming/house, emergency accommodation/night shelter/women's refuge/ youth shelter

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), cited in: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2012: 31.

Struggling against the current

Stacey* was still reeling from the sting of the blow from her husband, Tom. She couldn't believe it had happened again—and this time in front of the kids, Katelyn and Drew.

Even more shocking was what Tom said next. 'I will leave you with nothing,' he said. 'No kids, no house, no car, no assets—nothing.'

*Names and images changed for the safety of Stacey and her children.

Stacey, Tom and the kids lived in a four-bedroom, two-story house in an affluent suburb in Sydney's northwest. Stacey worked writing policy and copy for government departments. Tom ran a successful building company. They had an investment property as a nest egg.

Over a couple of years, Tom's personality changed dramatically and this resulted in a broken family with no place to live. In addition to the violence, he became emotionally distant and stopped helping with the kids.

Prior to the break-up of the family, Tom was in charge of making the mortgage repayments. Stacey did not know that Tom was not making the payments, and instead using the money to support another woman.

One night, Tom came home late just as Stacey was preparing the kids for their bath. Stacey asked him where he had been. He punched her and put the kids in scalding bath water. They screamed in pain.

Stacey, desperately worried for the kids, asked Tom to leave there and then. Tom left and headed overseas.

Over the previous 18 months the couple's loan repayments had fallen severely into arrears. The bank forced the sale of both properties to recoup the debt.

So, Stacey, Katelyn, and Drew had to move out of their home and rent a rundown house in another suburb Tom moved most of the couple's remaining assets overseas and refused to pay maintenance, claiming bankruptcy.

Despite the turmoil at home, Stacey's work deadlines did not let up. She had the kids to take care of and struggled to put food on the table. The stress was overwhelming and, combined with the trauma, she started to suffer debilitating anxiety attacks.

Her doctor put her on strong antidepressants to give her some relief. They made her so drowsy, however, that she could not work and had to take unpaid leave. Stacey was constantly worrying how she would pay the rent. How would she keep a roof over their heads?

She applied for Centrelink support but knew it would not go far enough. She was then forced to use her retired father's credit card to cover essentials such as electricity, phone, and gas—accruing a spiralling amount of debt.

Stacey also began court action with the help of Legal Aid to make sure her husband paid maintenance, but a result was a long way off.

The moment she had dreaded—seeking food vouchers from a charity—finally arrived. She had put it off and, although she felt very humiliated, had the kids to think about and accepted the vouchers.

'The kids were my only focus,' she said.

> ## 'The kids were my only focus,' she said.

One day, she called her electricity provider to ask for some way of making minimal payments—just to keep the lights on in the house. On the phone she mentioned that she did not know how she was going to pay the rent or the electricity bill that was due that month.

The woman on the other end of the line mentioned Wesley Mission accommodation for families unable to afford a place to live. It was a call that changed Stacey's and her children's lives. Just in time, they found accommodation, counselling, and a warm welcome from Wesley Mission accommodation. Now Stacey, Katelyn and Drew have the space and time to work out the next steps.

There are steep challenges ahead. Stacey is still trying to deal with the depression caused by Tom's violence. This is preventing her from returning to full-time work. She is also seeing worrying signs of how this has affected her kids. Drew sticks to himself at school and often lashes out at Stacey at home. Katelyn is constantly craving affection from her mum and has learning difficulties, including poor memory.

'I only like to remember good things, Mummy,' she often says to Stacey.

Tom wants to take the kids overseas with him and fulfil his ultimate threat to leave her with nothing. Fortunately, Stacey was able to claim the childrens' passports through the courts and prevent this.

Stacey also had another minor victory in court and is now receiving minimal maintenance from her husband. It is still well short of a sufficient amount to take care of the kids.

The battle for survival continues in the shadow of a man who inexplicably became his own family's worst nightmare.

Family homelessness in Australia

The aim of this study is to provide insight into experiences of homelessness for families and those who may have experienced homelessness at a young age. Before reviewing these experiences and their implications on policy and practice, it is important to take a step back and review the context of family homelessness in Australia. It is within this context that support services operate, that policies take effect and that families seek help.

The following section provides a brief outline of the context and experience of homelessness in Australia, with a particular focus on families and those who have experienced homelessness at a young age.

A snapshot of homelessness in Australia

Homelessness is an issue of national significance. In 2011–2012, specialist homelessness services provided assistance to almost one in every 100 Australians (AIHW, 2012:7). In total, 229,247 people asked for assistance through funded services, including those offered by Wesley Mission.

In Australia, access to supported housing is generally short to medium-term in nature. More than 7 million nights of accommodation were provided in 2011–2012, and an average of 82 nights of housing assistance was received per individual. Around one-quarter of clients receiving housing assistance stayed less than five nights while 32 per cent was provided with between six and 45 nights of assistance. A smaller proportion (16 per cent) were provided with accommodation services for more than 180 nights.

There is evidence to suggest that women are more likely to seek assistance than men and that family units make up a significant proportion of presentations for assistance. In 2011–2012, 59 per cent of all presentations to specialist support agencies were women and 41 per cent were men. While most people seeking help and assistance presented alone (67 per cent), family presentations comprised almost one-third (32 per cent) of all those seeking help. Of all family presentations, 74 per cent were single parents with children, and 16 per cent were couples with children.

Women often face higher risks (in particular risks of sexual abuse and violence) while sleeping rough when compared to males (Weber, Sikich, 2008 and Anderson, 2001) and this might account for the higher proportion of women seeking help from support services. There is also a considerable body of evidence which shows that when mothers leave their homes they are highly likely to take their children with them. Findings from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) data indicate most families seeking support were headed by females in the age group 25–44 years. These findings also indicated that children aged 0–14 represented more than half (55 per cent) of all family unit presentations. Furthermore over 17 per cent of all homeless in Australia are under the age of 12.

Essentially, increased risk and the associated dangers to children often motivates mothers to remove their children from a dangerous situation and immediately seek the assistance of support services to re-establish a roof over their heads as soon as possible.

'Reducing homelessness is everyone's responsibility. Australia's efforts to reduce homelessness have to be urgent, as well as sustained.' (The Road Home, 2008: 3)

Over 17% are now under 12

Over 17 per cent of Australia's homeless are now under the age of 12

Families represent almost 1/3

Homeless families represented almost one third 32 per cent of those receiving support in 2011–2012. In most cases, homeless families were single adults with children

Women are more likely to seek assistance

Women are more likely to seek assistance than men, and threats of violence or family breakdown were often behind the decision to leave the family home

Home is less safe

In many cases it was clear that staying home was considered to be less safe than the alternatives. A risk to safety often motivated homeless mothers to remove their children from the situation and immediately seek the assistance of support services to re-establish a roof over their heads as soon as possible

Homelessness is not desired

Even though home was not a safe place to stay, homelessness is not a desired solution: Parents spoke of the deep shame they felt about having to disclose to their children the fact that they were homeless. Parents also discussed the deep and long lasting impact that homelessness had on their relationships with their children

Preserving a sense of normality is critical

Fear of damage to the parent/child relationship often meant that preserving a sense of normality and maintaining a stable situation—despite the stressors of homelessness—was critical for many parents

Stage two
Wesley Mission research

Homelessness as a safer alternative

The drivers of homelessness are myriad, with influences including domestic and family violence, eviction and relationship/family breakdowns through to financial stress and loss of employment. Homelessness is often linked to underlying factors and social influences including crime, substance abuse, domestic violence and mental illness (Merrill, Richards & Sloan 2011; FaHCSIA, 2008; Haber & Toro., 2004; Jainchill, Hawke & Yagelka, 2000; Anderson, 2001).

While the factors that contribute to homelessness are complicated, ultimately **it is clear that home is often considered by many participants to be less safe than alternatives**—in some cases even less safe than sleeping rough.

For mothers interviewed in this study, incidents of domestic violence are often the reason for leaving the family home with their children.

'Her dad used to be really violent. That's why I left and I went into refuge with my daughter. We went back home after one day. He said everything will change, it won't happen again. But it did. Unfortunately I stayed, and that's why DoCS intervened.'
(Female, 36 years, two children, pregnant with third)

'We were sitting there one night at my mother's, we were allowed to go there for once. She came and picked us up. Then she came out to the lounge room with a shotgun. I was only eight… she would flog me— just flog me where I'd lose me breath and black out to a point where I couldn't get me breath back.'
(Male, 41 years, one child)

'You think that's normal and that you deserve it, that's all that you deserve because that's mostly what happens in domestic violence relationships.'
(Female, 18 years, one child, pregnant with second)

Supporting participants' experiences, many previous studies have identified the role that domestic violence and gender inequalities play in female homelessness (Anderson 2001; Haber & Toro 2004, Tually, Faulkner, Cutler & Slatter, 2008). Nationally, 34 per cent of all clients were seeking homelessness support as a result of experiencing domestic violence and, of this group, the vast majority (78 per cent) were females with most aged between 18–34 years (67 per cent) (AIHW, 2012).

Participants in this research study who had become homeless at a young age (under 16 years) were often likely to indicate that **family breakdown** was the key contributor to homelessness. In many instances, family conflict was triggered by a new partner or individual altering household dynamics. This change led to many of those who had left home under the age of 16 years feeling that home was no longer a safe place to be.

'When my mum died, my dad got another girlfriend and got married to her and she's the one who kicked us all out.' (Female, 18 years)

'(Mum's) ex-boyfriend and I didn't get along at all and he kind of kept pushing us apart, and it worked. She took his side and wanted me to pretty much leave, so I left.'
(Female, 23 years)

Recent longitudinal research by the Melbourne Institute (2012) supports these comments, with family breakdown identified as the most common reason for homelessness for those being studied.

Participants who had become homeless at an early age were also likely to indicate that they had left the family home as a result of the **lack of a suitable parental role model.** In some cases, the lack of a parental role model was seen to increase the chance of harm for the individual. In many of these cases, participants reported that it was parental criminal justice issues, mental illnesses or drug or alcohol addictions which made the home unsafe and led to their decision to leave.

'My dad was in a bikie club for my whole life. So that made things a little bit harder, with the alcohol and the aggression at home at all times. I kind of just made a choice to leave home.' (Male, 21 years)

'(Mum) ended up not being there most of the time, I would probably say one hour a week, and then she would just go to work. She was very up and down and dad said he couldn't handle it, and that's why he left. He never really had anything to do with us. He said he preferred work over seeing us.' (Female, 17 years)

While it was clear that many participants had experienced situations which made the home unsafe, it is important to note that a number of families and those who left the home at a young age often did so as a result of individual factors, rather than any issues with the household situation.

As an example, substance abuse was not confined to parents. Several male participants indicated that it was their own addictions which resulted in them leaving the house rather than an issue that one of their parents might have had.

'I was working on and off, but most of the time I was just taking drugs. All your mates are in it as well. They're really good mates, like family. They're all trying to just basically have a good time constantly, like 24/7, without you know, any stressors.' (Male, 19 years)

'I was looking for something … it was nothing my parents did, I wasn't abused or any of that stuff— I simply looked for adventure and started to take drugs. That all ended up with poly-drug use and homelessness.' (Male, 37 years)

Mental health concerns were also not limited to parents or family relations of those who were homeless. Several participants indicated that their personal mental health issues resulted in them leaving the home or seeking assistance from homelessness services.

'I got mental health issues when I was still at home. A lot of stuff just started going on, like starting from my nan's death. That was the first thing and everything just kept going on from then. That's when my mental health issues built and got worse.' (Female, 18 years)

Several participants indicated that they currently suffered from mental health issues, but many were not able to determine if these issues were caused by being homeless or were the reason for their homelessness. Ultimately, the stressors of multiple episodes of homelessness from an early age were often seen by participants to exacerbate existing or underlying conditions.

'Many of those who had left home under the age of 16 years had felt that home was no longer a safe place to be.'

Homelessness takes a significant toll on the individual and family

While homelessness was, in many instances, seen as safer than other alternatives; it was by no means a suitable solution in the eyes of those who had experienced it. All participants felt that homelessness was a terrible situation to be in and that their experiences had often left them more vulnerable from a social, emotional and physical perspective.

'Homelessness is s***—it's degrading, it's disgusting. I look at my situation and think what has happened— where has my chance at a family gone? Where has my chance at a career gone? Why don't I have a relationship?' (Male, 37 years, first homeless at 14 years and recovering from a heroin addiction)

'I've never slept out on the streets because I've done everything in my power not to be in that situation. Especially now I've got a daughter, no way that's happening.' (Female, 21 years, one child)

'I'm on my own. And because I'm in this predicament I don't let (my children) know where I am. This is embarrassing, it's absolutely embarrassing—it's degrading and embarrassing.'
(Male, 51 years, eight children)

It was clear that homelessness also had a **significant impact on parent/child relationships and family functioning.**

Most parents had limited or no access to their children and all felt that this restrictive access and breakdown of family time had a detrimental impact on their children and on them personally.

'Ever since I've left home I haven't been getting in contact with (my son). I phoned my ex to get numbers because he's got my phone and I can't get in contact with any of my family.' (Female, 50 years, three children)

The cyclical nature of homelessness was also a significant contributor to parent/child relationship breakdown.

'My son has been in foster homes since he was born, but my daughter had been in more care. She was with me up until six months. Then welfare took her away but then I got her back. I sort of cleaned myself up a bit. And then I left the refuge and then I got her taken away again.' (Female, 36 years, two children, lost a third baby, pregnant with fourth child)

As a result of this potential breakdown, **many parents indicated that protecting their relationship with their child and ensuring that their child maintained some sense of normality during periods of homelessness was critical.** Mothers, particularly, indicated that this was one of their key concerns.

'Because I looked at her and thought I can't change what (my parents) did to me. I can't change it, but I can learn within myself to undo it so it stops at me. She's not going to be like that with her children. My mother would say she treated me that way because of her mother. There's a whole cycle of it. It stops at me and I've done that and I've achieved that and we are a family and when she has children we will be a family. And she's picked a beautiful boy so I've accomplished a lot now, finally.' (Female, 49 years, one 20 year old daughter)

'I've tried everything I can to prevent it from affecting (my daughter). I've tried to keep everything as stable as I can. Ever since I've started to take things in my own hands, I've been trying to do it right. I just wanted everything to be stable.' (Female, 21 years, one five year old child, first homeless when a teenager)

Ultimately, homelessness was seen as a last resort and as a situation which had a direct impact on the quality of family and interpersonal relationships. Many parents focused on trying to preserve or protect their relationship with their child despite the difficulties they faced.

Ultimately, homelessness was seen as a last resort and as a situation which had a direct impact on the quality of family and interpersonal relationships. Many parents focused on trying to preserve or protect their relationship with their child despite the difficulties they faced.

Kelly looked for safety but kept finding danger

Kelly remembers drawing a chair up to the kitchen shelf as a child and levering the child safety cap off the cough mixture with a knife. She was being sexually abused by a family friend and was looking for something to help her sleep. She said it was the first way she tried to deal with the trauma she was going through.

'My bedroom became unsafe,' she said. 'But really I didn't feel safe anywhere.'

She was unable to find the words to tell her parents but her pain made itself felt in so many other ways. She started fighting with her mum, her school work suffered, and she was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). As the abuse continued, she grew to hate the pristine waterside town she was growing up in and at 15 left home, moving in with her boyfriend and his mum. Her boyfriend's mum, in drunken rages, would regularly kick them out. When that happened they would live on the streets of inner Sydney or on trains.

This was the way Kelly ended her childhood. She had no place to live and used drugs to kill the pain as she had first done with the cough mixture. Now 30, despite brave attempts to establish a stable life for herself, she has been homeless for most of her adult life. She is now living at Wesley Mission's Community Housing in Sydney's inner west. Kelly has a three-year-old son, Charlie, is pregnant with her second child and wondering what the future holds.

With support from Wesley Mission, she feels like she is getting closer to creating a permanent home for her children.

It has been a long journey, with many challenges in front of her. At 16, she spent a few days in juvenile detention for theft. Upon release, Kelly was referred to a refuge and said it was the first time she was aware of the support available to her.

'It was the first time I talked to people about what I'd faced,' she said. 'It planted the seed about finding a voice and asking for help.'

With this support, Kelly eventually returned to her hometown, took a job in a little coffee shop and stopped using heavy drugs. She stayed either with her boyfriend or her parents. For the first time since she was a small child, she enjoyed a life that was safe and stable.

However, the few years of peace were not to last.

The man who abused her as a child returned to the town and made sexual advances toward her. It brought to the surface all of the trauma she had suffered and everything she had been through since. Everything felt unsafe again. She felt so angry that she wanted to physically hurt him.

She left town in a hurry and returned to the streets of Sydney and to being homeless. She wanted to feel oblivious to the hurt and anger and started taking heroin.

'At 25, the drugs caused me to get really sick with pneumonia and septicaemia,' she said. 'That was when I got serious about getting off drugs. In rehab, I started to address all these difficult things about my life.'

Kelly said she spent more time in rehab programs than the time she was actually on drugs. However, she finally won the battle and is a regular at Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

'It's very hard for a kid to understand why he can't live with his mum.'

Kelly's son Charlie spent his childhood living with relatives. However, now that Kelly has a safe place to stay in Wesley Mission's Community Housing program, her son can stay with her more often.

'Before that was possible, Charlie used to ask me where I went while he was staying with Mum,' she said. 'It's very hard for a kid to understand why he can't live with his mum.'

Kelly was very excited the first time Charlie came to stay with her.

'I told him this was his house too,' she said. 'He has his own little bed and a little toy box.'

With the support of Wesley Mission, she is getting back on her feet and getting closer to the day when she will live independently with her children.

She said that being a mother has changed her and brought so much joy to her life.

'I never felt love on this scale until I had a son,' she said. 'I love being a mum. It's challenging but a joy.'

The intergenerational impact of homelessness

While many studies have found that homeless adults have often experienced out-of-home placements and foster care during childhood (for example, Marpsat & Firdion, 2000; Bassuk et al., 1997; Burt et al., 2001, in: Haber & Toro., 2004), to-date, limited research is available in Australia that demonstrates a causal relationship between childhood experiences and adult situations.

That said, several recent Australian studies have begun to build an evidence base which shows a link between the experience of homelessness as a child and homelessness incidents as an adult. Most recently, research by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (Flatau, Conroy, Spooner, Edwards, Eardley & Forbes, 2013) shows that the rate of intergenerational homelessness among those who are recipients of homelessness services is relatively high. Around half (48 per cent) of all respondents to the Intergenerational Homelessness Survey reported that their parents had also been homeless at some point in their lives (Flatau et. al., 2013; 2). In addition, the study found that 'in most cases where homelessness is experienced before the age of 18 it is a not a single episode but one of several episodes of homelessness' (Flatau et. al., 2013; 2).

The following chapter seeks to provide experiential comment from individuals who have experienced homelessness as a child, with the aim of providing insight into the potential long-term effects of this experience on the individual and the consequences of this experience on functioning as an adult.

Homelessness has far-reaching consequences

It was clear from discussions with participants who had been homeless before the age of 16 that most felt this initial experience had a considerable impact on their life as an adult and any subsequent experiences of homelessness. It is important to note that, in many cases, participants had difficultly separating the impact of the cause of their homelessness (for example, violence) from the impact of the homeless incident itself. That said, participants consistently felt that exposure to stressors as a result of their experience of homelessness as a child had long-lasting detrimental impacts.

'It makes you feel like you're in a Third World country when you're living on the streets. It makes you over-think people a lot. Like you have a lot of distrust in people, that's the really hard thing.' (Male, 21 years)

'When it comes to trusting people, yeah I reckon that would have something to do with it, that's affected me.' (Female, 17 years)

'My eating has been an issue for a bit now. I'd say it's harder not being in the refuges because you have a routine where you cook and people cook for you. And in caravan parks, you have to buy your own food and cook it. I just find it hard being by myself, I guess.' (Female, 18 years)

'I just don't get along with people. For some reason, I don't know. I'm jealous, I can't be in crowds, it always just got to be me.' (Female, 17 years)

'It's only until just recently I got off everything. It has made me who I am, and the mistakes I've made, I've learnt from them and become who I am today. Like I feel the same as I did back then, but how efficiently my mind works and solves problems is just nowhere near as good as it used to be.' (Male, 19 years)

'I could have had a job, a house but yeah, I left. I didn't like being there. I suppose I could have gone back to school and done all that, I would have a career by now.' (Female, 21 years)

The impacts of experiences of homelessness as a child affected multiple aspects of the individual's life and were not confined simply to educational or early development elements. Discussions with participants indicated that the effects were felt across seven key areas:

- withdrawal from relationships
- loss of innocence
- a fear of reaching out
- exacerbation of vulnerabilities
- learned behaviour
- responsibility beyond their age
- disengagement with learning and employment

Seven key areas

Almost all participants felt that experiencing homelessness at a young age had a considerable impact on their life as an adult and any subsequent episodes of homelessness. Discussions with participants indicated that the effects were felt across seven key areas:

Withdrawal from relationships

Resulting in a lack of a support network and increased likelihood of a relapse into homelessness as a result of limited support

1.

Loss of innocence

As a result of exposure, while homeless, to violence or sexual abuse. This had a considerable impact on an individual's ability to trust others or seek assistance

2.

A fear of reaching out

Resulting in distrust and a lack of willingness to ask for assistance. This often resulted in cyclical homelessness or extended periods of rough sleeping

3.

4.

Exacerbation of vulnerabilities

Including the exacerbation of mental health issues, which often led to significant problems later in life

Learned behaviour

As a result of experiences when young, there was an increased likelihood that an individual would relapse into homelessness later in life

5.
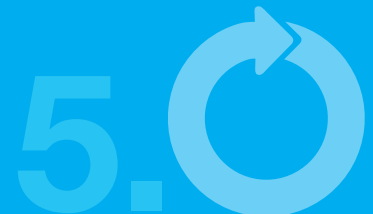
Responsibility beyond their age

A requirement to juggle many important life decisions at a young age. This was seen to lead to an increased chance that an incorrect decision would be made, resulting in negative consequences in later life

6.

Disengagement with learning and employment

Resulting in a long-term negative effect on employment, leading to an increased risk of adult homelessness (as a result of a lack of financial resources)

7.

1.

Withdrawal from relationships

Many participants felt that exposure to the stressors of homelessness as a child had resulted in **difficulty forming meaningful relationships as an adult.** Many spoke about a sense of deep distrust of others that had developed as a result of their experiences as a child and the impact that this distrust had on their ability to interact socially.

'It's very hard for me to trust somebody. I find it really hard to keep friendships. I will be friends for about 3-6 months and that's it. I would love to have a kid but my problem is that I wouldn't want to be in a relationship and I wouldn't want to bring a child up alone anyway.'
(Female, 23 years, homeless as a child and then again as a teenager, currently homeless)

Participants who had left home at an early age had often left brothers and sisters behind, resulting in fractured family relationships that took a long time to mend, if ever.

'I have no contact with him…last thing I heard was that he was in prison. I left my brother there at home—that was hard, I saw him once a few months ago.'
(Male, 21 years, first homeless at 16)

This loss of contact and disintegration of relationships at an early age often resulted in a diminished support network as an adult. This, in turn, led to a greater chance of support services being the only option when an individual faced housing difficulties as an adult.

2.

Loss of innocence

Several participants spoke of losing their innocence as a result of experiencing homelessness as children. Many of these participants had witnessed things they felt no child should have to witness. They also indicated that the implications of this negative exposure had been long-lasting and multi-faceted. Discussions along these lines often centred on witnessing acts of violence, observing illegal behaviour such as drug-taking and being exposed to crime and criminality.

'Some of the kids you see in refuges, they've had it a lot harder than me. I got stabbed three times. So when I was 16 years old, it's not really the best sort of things. There were always drugs, alcohol, everything around.'
(Male, 21 years, homeless since his early teens)

Participants spoke of being attacked and assaulted while sleeping rough or sleeping in shelters and, as a result, **developing a deep distrust for other individuals at a young age.** This included a distrust of adults, males or people in positions of authority.

'Many of these participants had witnessed things they felt no child should have to witness.'

3.

A fear of reaching out

Linked to the above point, several participants discussed the fact that their childhood experiences had resulted in a fear of reaching out and asking for assistance in later life. Exposure to stressors as a child had taught these individuals to be wary of exposing any vulnerabilities to others and to be cautious of offers of assistance, as nothing was ever freely offered.

'All I knew then was that everyone was after something … they'd get you for $5—it took me a long time to realise that this wasn't how everyone was.'
(Male, 51 years, eight children)

For these participants, learned distrust ran deep and had an impact on how they interacted with peers, support services and government agencies.

The implication of this distrust was that some had been exposed to the stressors of homelessness for prolonged periods as a result of an unwillingness to reach out and seek help. Participants told of situations where assistance could have been accessed. **As a result of their learned fears and distrust, however, assistance was not sought or it was knocked back.** This then resulted in a greater likelihood of repeated episodes or prolonged single episodes.

'I was frightened to go and ask for help because I thought I'd be put in a girl's home because of my dad being gay and everything. I was very, very aware that I was a prime target for someone to set me up for drugs. There was drugs everywhere, heroin addicts, prostitutes, people getting their throats slit, it was a very heavy place and I knew I couldn't tell anyone my situation because I was so vulnerable.'
(Female, 49 years, first left home at 14)

4.

Exacerbation of vulnerabilities

As discussed, separating the antecedents of homelessness from the impacts of the experience of homelessness is difficult. However, it was clear that **experiences of homelessness as a child exacerbated vulnerabilities,** including those related to physical and mental health.

Many participants felt that their early exposure to homelessness, and the resulting cyclical nature of their homelessness, had resulted in significant mental and physical decline.

'I can't be in crowds.'

'If there are too many people, I faint or pass out.'

'I have PTSD … from the sexual abuse and those things.'

'My body looked like I was dying.'

'I have diabetes, schizophrenia, depression and I am an alcoholic.'

'I experimented, but then I shot up because I was lonely.'
(Collation of multiple participant comments)

Some indicated that they had self-medicated and, as a result, had developed drug and alcohol dependencies later in life. This resulted in **deeper, longer-lasting effects on housing and employment stability.** These dependencies could result in exposure to crime and criminality and experience with the juvenile justice system, affecting the individual's employment opportunities later in life. Others indicated that a decline in their mental or physical capacity had resulted in withdrawal from social engagement and a restriction in social support. This, in turn, led to **repeat episodes of homelessness** as a result of a lack of a reliable and stable support network.

5.

Learned behaviour

A few participants indicated that their experience of homelessness as a child had resulted in **negative learned behaviour and an increased chance of regressing to a homeless state as an adult.** Essentially, the state of homelessness could be initiated as a default state during times of stress.

One participant discussed the fact that, after many years of 'normal' functioning, she experienced an extremely stressful time in her life and found herself in the same location she had been when she was homeless as a young person. At this point, she found herself trying to find a blanket and contemplating going to sleep under the bridge where she had been many years before.

'I've come back to where I was when I was 14. Just before I got here I had a bit of a nervous breakdown. My first two weeks I was a bit of a nutcase, I was like, 'I feel I'm going to pass out', I couldn't think straight.'
(Female, 49 years, one child)

The implication was that this learned state increased the chance of adult homelessness. Those who had experienced homelessness as a child are more likely to re-enter this state than someone who may not have had this experience at an early age, simply because for them it has some degree of normality attached. For the individual discussed above, her childhood experiences had left her vulnerable to repeat episodes and the negative experiences that accompany these experiences. This was despite the fact that she had been employed and raised a family over a number of years.

6.

Responsibility beyond their age

A few participants indicated that homelessness as a child had forced them to make decisions which they considered to be 'adult' decisions. Decisions about where to live, what to eat, whether or not to attend school, who to reach out to for assistance.

For some, homelessness at a young age forced them to have to try to juggle a series of complex decisions resulting in failures (or perceived failures) that contributed to a decline in self-confidence and self-esteem.

'Just the order of that formula, right? Work, a place to live, study, which job, which course, where do I live? All these variables that are thrown into those four issues. There is inside me now a tendency to be scared of, you know, getting work because I don't know how to do it any more. The other thing is relationships, not having that stability has really, really affected my relationships and the way in which I socialise with people.'
(Male, 37 years)

In some ways, juggling these complex decisions was seen as adult behaviour and associated with the loss of innocence described above.

7.

Disengagement with learning and employment

Although not commonly discussed, it was clear that experiences of homelessness at a young age had an **impact on skills development and education.** Several participants indicated that they had dropped out of school and not completed Year 12 as a result of their experiences.

'(I dropped out just before) Year 12, just before the exams, and that was probably the biggest mistake of my life really. I had to leave because of getting kicked out of home and everything was so hectic and I had nowhere to live at that stage and it was full-on.' (Female, 23 years, homeless as a child and then again as a teenager, currently homeless)

The impact of this was long-lasting. Several participants discussed the longer-term impacts of this decision on their future employment—with many having difficulty explaining to potential employers why they had dropped out of school and why their CVs had gaps of several years where no work history was available.

Those who had experienced homelessness as a child are more likely to re-enter this state than someone who may not have had this experience at an early age, simply because for them it has some degree of normality attached.

Trapped in the home or desperately in need of one

Zehra's two eldest sons each left home at the age of 16, one moving into Department of Housing accommodation and the other going to live with friends.

*While Zehra has used her own name, other names have been changed to protect privacy of other individuals in the story.

They had grown up with the violence of their dad, Zehra's husband, and then lived with the violence of Zehra's new partner.

Finally Zehra herself gathered the resolve and courage to leave her partner—even though she did not have anywhere to go.

She found share accommodation but her share mate also turned out to be extremely aggressive. For lack of a better option Zehra moved again, this time into a refuge in Sydney's Chinatown. Here she was at risk of theft or assault. She had escaped an unsafe home but security still eluded her.

This was the first time that Zehra became homeless. She is now homeless for the fourth time, living at Wesley Mission's Edward Eagar Lodge. Each time she has been forced from the place she called home by violence or financial stress. Each time she felt the shame of being homeless.

Zehra came to Australia from Turkey with her parents when she was three years old. When her young brother came along her parents took her out of school to look after him. They locked the children in the house while they went to work.

As a teenager, Zehra's parents would not let her go out with her friends or even go to the shops by herself. The restrictions rankled Zehra and she looked for ways to rebel. At 18, she eloped with a man who turned out to be extremely violent.

Too ashamed to return to her parents, and without anyone else to turn to, she stayed in the marriage and had two sons.

Zehra approached her doctor about the violence but he simply prescribed valium to calm her nerves. Zehra said she was very uninformed about drugs and, without knowing other options, filled the prescription.

'The valium really blew me away emotionally,' she said.

Each night she would prepare her son's school lunches and uniforms and put them to bed. Then she would take the valium with alcohol to pass out before her husband came home. It was the only way she knew to escape the violence—and it led to harder drug use.

After 16 years, she risked even more violence by leaving her husband, and then had to work 18 hours a day to support her children as a single mother.

'I just had to do it on my own. I had no family support.'

Struggling to keep up at work, she started to take speed and it became an addiction that lasted years.

'I just had to do it on my own. I had no family support'

When Zehra met and fell in love with her new partner she thought it would be a new start. He became, however, increasingly possessive until he stopped letting her leave the house altogether and controlled her money. Eventually, the nightmare of violence in the home returned.

'With him, I didn't feel like I had a safe home. I didn't feel like I had anything of my own,' she said.

Despite the difficulties, Zehra tried to give up the drugs, starting on a methadone program. Her youngest son, Ediz*, was born at this time, coming into the world prematurely due to the methadone.

With the violence and the difficult birth, it was no surprise that Zehra developed post-natal depression. She eventually put Ediz into the care of her sister-in-law, Afet.

At Wesley Mission's Edward Eagar Lodge Zehra said she finally feels like she has found a safe place to live, to think and to get back on her feet.

Each time Zehra has been homeless she has not told her two oldest sons because she has been so ashamed.

'Even your own children will judge you,' she said with certainty.

She does not get on with her eldest son but catches up with her second son as much as she can. She sees Ediz only when Afet has time to visit with him. She desperately wants to have her sons with her but it will be a long journey to that point when she can bridge the years living apart and the unresolved issues.

'One day, when I am back on my feet, I will be able to look my sons in the eye again and tell them I did everything I could for them.'

Seeking support

It was clear from discussions with participants that the value of support can go beyond a roof and begin to redress some of the deeper effects of family homelessness and of homelessness at an early age. Critically, the issues which were being addressed went beyond the obvious—food, shelter and safety—to deeper issues associated with social and emotional wellbeing.

There is clear evidence of the benefits of having the opportunity to 'stop and pause' in helping people break the cycle of their homelessness.

The next section provides a summary of discussions with participants in relation to the perceived value of seeking support. As outlined in the introduction to this report, the research is not designed to provide an evaluation of service quality or impact—rather, the following section provides the client view on how homelessness support services have an impact on them, their family and their broader network.
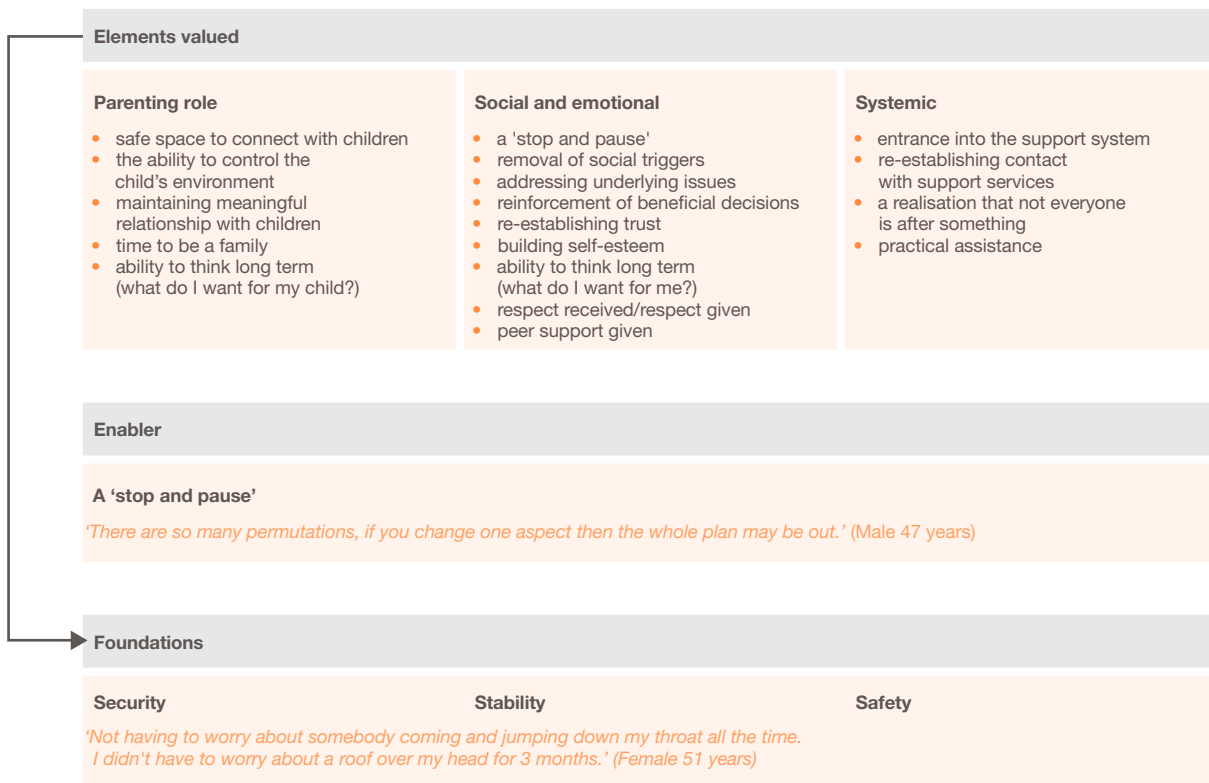
An overview of what is valued

It was clear that a variety of benefits of service access were valued by participants, ranging from those associated with a change in physical situation through to benefits associated with softer social aspects. It was also clear that seeking and receiving help had long-term benefits for parents and their families specifically, beyond benefits which were seen for single participants.

In almost all instances, the core benefits associated with seeking help were consistent, namely the need for security, safety and stability of circumstance. In essence, these can be considered to be' foundation' benefits—they are the basic benefits from which all other benefits are obtained or valued.

Following from this foundation, several broader types of benefits were seen, with some being specific to the role that the participant may have (for example, a parent) or to overcoming specific barriers that may be present (for example drug or alcohol related issues). What is interesting is that many of these benefits go beyond the benefits more closely associated with the provision of support, and demonstrate the broader social and emotional benefits of seeking assistance.

The diagram below provides a summary of the foundation and specific benefits identified and each of these elements is discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Figure 2: The value of seeking support

Elements valued

Parenting role
- safe space to connect with children
- the ability to control the child's environment
- maintaining meaningful relationship with children
- time to be a family
- ability to think long term (what do I want for my child?)

Social and emotional
- a 'stop and pause'
- removal of social triggers
- addressing underlying issues
- reinforcement of beneficial decisions
- re-establishing trust
- building self-esteem
- ability to think long term (what do I want for me?)
- respect received/respect given
- peer support given

Systemic
- entrance into the support system
- re-establishing contact with support services
- a realisation that not everyone is after something
- practical assistance

Enabler

A 'stop and pause'

There are so many permutations, if you change one aspect then the whole plan may be out.' (Male 47 years)

Foundations

Security   **Stability**   **Safety**

Not having to worry about somebody coming and jumping down my throat all the time.
I didn't have to worry about a roof over my head for 3 months.' (Female 51 years)

1. Basic needs critical

In almost all instances, the core benefits associated with seeking help were consistent, namely the need for security, safety and stability of circumstance, and at its most basic, a roof. In essence, these can be considered to be 'foundation' benefits and are a critical requirement

2. Safety and security

The desire for safety and security were closely related. Security was generally related to a sense of physical safety associated with the security arrangements of accommodation (locks on doors, private rooms, etc). Safety itself was more closely related to the removal of external risks such as exposure to domestic violence as a result of relationship breakdown, or access to drugs or alcohol

3. Planning for the future

Safety, security and stability enabled participants to **'stop and pause'**—to consider their options and to begin to plan their future. This was something that was highly valued and often not available when the stressors associated with homelessness were the key focus. For some, it was simply a sense of respite and of relief from the dangers associated with their personal circumstances. For others, it was a circuit-breaker, which enabled them to remove themselves from negative influences or situations and begin the process of recovery

4. Healing relationships

For parents, the ability to **'stop and pause'** enabled them to consider their relationships with their children and to plan the steps required to address issues associated with contact

5. Addressing deeper vulnerabilities

For those who had been homeless as children, the ability to **'stop and pause'** enabled them to begin the process of addressing some of the deeper vulnerabilities which contribute to the cycle of homelessness, without the need to focus only on the basics of food, shelter and safety

6. Seeking support

Beyond these benefits, seeking support began the process of re-engagement. Although, where negative service interactions were encountered, these served to reinforce distrust and a desire to disengage

Parenting role benefits

Beyond the foundation benefits of seeking assistance, participants also identified benefits which were specific to their parenting role. In essence, seeking help not only assisted them personally, but also assisted children who might be with them, children who were in care and the broader family unit, including siblings.

Table 2: Key benefits of seeking assistance for parents	
Benefit	**Experiences**
Safe place to connect For many parents, homelessness support provided them with a safe place to connect with children. For some, time with their children had been prevented because of a risk of exposure to violence or abuse either in the family home or when sleeping rough. A service which provided the three foundation benefits (safety, security and stability) provided a platform on which to reconnect with children and to spend time oriented toward deeper needs of the child rather than more immediate needs such as food, shelter and safety.	*'You get some lovely workers, and I've got a different worker this time. She's just really there for me. Even though we [referring to child and herself] don't have a house, she's the one helping me, making referrals and trying to just keep me positive.'* (Female, 18 years, one child, pregnant with second)
Maintenance of a meaningful relationship For some, support services provided the ability to maintain a meaningful relationship with their children, which was not possible without the assistance of these services. As discussed, the 'stop and pause' that seeking help facilitated often enabled parents to undertake necessary steps required to regain access to children.	
Time to be a family A supportive environment often resulted in the ability to spend time as a family. The ability to be together in a safe, supportive and predictable environment without the time pressures associated with other, less stable, environments was seen as a key benefit of seeking assistance.	*'I didn't have a fixed address or it wasn't really the most appropriate place. Now it's great. I have my son and he's able to come and stay with me'* (Female, 30 years, one child, pregnant with second)

Social and emotional benefits

For those who had been homeless for a considerable period of time (many had experienced cyclical homelessness since the age of 16), cumulative exposure to the stressors associated with homelessness had resulted in the development of multiple vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities affected all facets of life, from the ability to engage in meaningful employment through to fragility of physical and psychological wellbeing.

Many participants, both those with and without children, felt that seeking assistance provided them the opportunity to address some of these deeper social and emotional vulnerabilities. In many ways, seeking assistance opened the door to other forms of assistance and began the process of addressing deeper vulnerabilities including drug and alcohol or mental health issues.

Addressing these deeper issues was seen as a critical step in overcoming the cycle of homelessness which, for many, had begun when they themselves were children. The table below provides a summary of the key social and emotional benefits discussed.

Table 3: Key social and emotional benefits	
Benefit	**Experiences**
Removal of social triggers For some, seeking assistance enabled them to remove themselves from social triggers that had an influence on the antecedents to their homelessness. This included distancing oneself from a specific peer group, social environment or drug.	*'I have to really follow my heart that's what it comes down to—I have to discover a good path and do what I'm passionate about. If I hang around negative environments, if I hang around negative people who aren't committed to getting on in life, of course I am not going to get on … I'm sort of in the middle of it.'* (Male, 37 years, first homeless at 16)
Reinforcement of beneficial decisions For others, seeking help reinforced the validity of the decision they had made to address some of the deeper issues which may have had an influence on their homelessness. For these participants, seeing others improve, witnessing the impact of poor decisions through the experience of others and adjusting the frame through which they saw the world (via a new peer group) all reinforced that seeking help was beneficial.	
Building self-esteem While building self esteem has been identified as a key benefit, for many, particularly those who had been homeless since the age of 16 years, a lack of confidence and low self-esteem was of considerable concern and something which they felt reduced their ability to move on, gain employment and break the cycle.	*'I just come to get self-esteem, so that you don't end up letting them hit you and treat you like crap. And you think that's normal and that you deserve that. I have communication with community services and a living skills program. That's basically about learning how to live independently.'* (Female, 18 years, one child)
The ability to think longer term Closely linked to the concept of support offering a 'stop and pause', many participants indicated that seeking support enabled them to think longer-term—something which had not been possible when their focus was on the immediacy of food, shelter and housing.	*'It's actually been really good for me, it's given me a chance to rest. It gave me a chance to sit back and just pay $140 a week and not have to have all the other bills, the time juggle when you're working full time.'* (Female, 49 years, one child)

Additional service benefits

Beyond the social and emotional benefits associated with seeking assistance, it was clear that participants valued the benefits gained as a result of re-engagement with the service system. For many who had been homeless as children, a deep sense of distrust in social support services was present.

'I was 16 years old and I went to the shelter, they told me that I was too young and that I would have to be looked after by DoCS. There was no way I was going to go into care, so I slept on the streets instead … it was OK, the older guys looked after some of the younger kids.' (Male, 21 years, first homeless at 16)

For parents, their previous experience with social services in relation to their childcare arrangements had, in some cases, resulted in distrust of 'government' services which then spread to a distrust of assistance services more generally. In some cases, children had been removed from the mother as a result of exposure to drugs, alcohol or violence and this traumatic experience was often at the heart of systemic distrust and a sense that services were designed to be punitive as opposed to supportive. Seeking assistance for homelessness and being provided an environment which enabled the foundation benefits of safety, security and stability to be obtained provided the space and time for re-engagement in the 'system' and a gradual re-establishment of trust in services. That said, many instances of poor service engagement and poor treatment were also identified and discussed, with this type of service interaction simply serving to reinforce a sense of distrust and lack of willingness to engage.

Three key systemic benefits discussed in relation to seeking support and assistance for homelessness are summarised in the table below.

Table 4: Additional service benefits

Benefit	Experiences
Entrance or recontact with the broader support system As discussed, the cyclical nature of homelessness means that many participants had lost touch with support services or had not sought support for deeper needs for many years. Many were not aware of the diversity of support services available (as they may not have been available when they were first seeking help many years ago) and some simply needed assistance in connecting to social support generally (assistance with interpreters, assistance with advice and information etc.).	*'Coming up here for example [to the service], I've never quite realised how many resources were up here.'* (Male, 37 years, first homeless at 16)
Re-establishment of trust Many of the participants had been homelessness for a considerable period of time over multiple occasions (since the age of 16 years or younger) and, as a result of failed interactions with services, had developed a sense of distrust with support systems and processes. A supportive environment enabled gradual reconnection with assistance services and an increase in trust.	*'It's the guy who knocks before he comes into my room—that's who I respect. That shows me that not everyone is after something, not everyone wants something from me and some people will treat me like a human.'* (Male, 51 years, eight children, homeless since the age of 16)
Basic, practical assistance It is important not to overlook the value of basic, practical assistance—this includes aspects such as the provision of counselling and case worker services, housing and meals. The importance of these services was reinforced by experiences discussed when these services are of poor quality or inadequate from a participant's perspective.	*'The one at [the service], that's just like fun but it doesn't help you in any way whatsoever. There's not as many rules, the rules aren't strict and we used to come back there like tripping balls all the time. But here, if they smell beer on your breath, you won't be allowed in. They're a lot more strict and it's more based on around long-term and moving forward.'* (Male, 19 years)

Key enabler: 'stop and pause'

Underpinning many of the broader benefits was the ability of support services to enable longer-term thinking. This was true for both parents (with their children and for those who had left children behind) and for participants who had first been homeless at the age of 16 years or younger.

For parents, seeking assistance provided the routine, support and safety which enabled them to step back from the considerable stressors associated with their situation (including violence, risk of harm and intimidation) and to gain some sense of respite and relief, both from an emotional and physical perspective etc.

'But I was so relieved to come here and not have to deal with him and I don't have to worry about all that. So yeah, it was a relief to just have somewhere to stay.' (Female, 51 years, five children)

'Believe me, it's like a break. I can go into my room and lie down and have a break.' (Female, 50 years, three children)

Many parents were not currently living with their children or had had their children placed in care prior to seeking assistance. Others may have had one child with them, but had left other children behind with other family members or partners—in essence, splitting the family both geographically and emotionally. For some of these parents, this 'stop and think' time allowed them to reassess the relationship that they either had, or wanted to have, and to consider the steps required to improve the relationships, gain access or increase the frequency of visits. It allowed them the time and space to think about what they wanted for their children and their family, something which might not have been possible when dealing with the multitude of stressors and concerns associated with homelessness (fear for safety, exposure to vulnerabilities):

'I think I was nearly dying a couple of times because I've OD'd and stuff. And I've lost my kid and stuff and now that I'm pregnant I don't want to lose my other kid. I guess it's kind of made me think that I've got to stop thinking about myself all the time. I started to think I wanted to be a better person and in order to do that I'm going to give up these things for myself and my children.' (Female, 21 years, one child and pregnant with second child)

For those who had been homeless when they were 16 years of age and under, the ability to 'stop and pause' and consider broader issues underpinned many of the benefits associated with seeking support. For these participants, seeking support gained them time to reflect on their current situation and assess where they were in their life and where they wanted to be. Time, in this sense, was gained by the removal of stressors, the ability to feel safe and secure and the introduction of routine which may have been missing for several months or years prior to seeking assistance. When discussing this concept, one participant who had first experienced homelessness at the age of 16 years (and then experienced cyclical episodes of homelessness and rehabilitation for drug addiction) noted that the time he spent in a homeless shelter enabled him to reframe his thinking, begin to avoid the negative thoughts, and start planning for the future.

'None of my dreams have been realised in terms of being this age, having broken up with my girlfriend… we were clean as well but not having children or the prospect of marriage or of a career or a car to jump in and drive—sometimes [on the street] it is easier to think of all of the things that you should have had, you know, just by doing the right thing. Part of it [is having the time] to get the order of the formula right…work, a place to live, study, which job to go for, which course, where do I live—all of these variables that are thrown into these four issues. There are so many factors involved, so many variables … I don't know yet, I don't know.' (Male, 47 years, first homeless at 16)

Time to 'stop and pause' was also seen as a circuit breaker—a disruption to a destructive routine which often included the negative influences which underpinned homelessness (such negative social influences or substance abuse). This disruption provided a safe space to consider the future, reconsider options and reconnect with a social group beyond that engaged with beyond the service environment.

'It's communal, there's a sense of community, there's always someone to talk to. I'll talk to people here, or I'll go to Narcotics Anonymous and talk to people there. As long as I'm dealing with how I'm feeling, my emotions about things, about what's happening to me today and I talk about it, then that's a good day.' (Male, 47 years)

Foundation elements— safety, stability, security

Consistently across interviews, the benefits most often identified with having somewhere to stay were security, stability and safety. Most applications for assistance resulted from the erosion of these three elements. As a result, if the service provided to the homeless is to be judged as beneficial, it must have addressed these concerns.

'(Finding shelter) also meant that all the arguments stopped because we were fighting constantly and he was very aggressive and verbally abusive. But so I was relieved to come here and not have to deal with him and I don't have to worry about all that. So, yeah, it was a relief to just have somewhere to stay.' (Female, 51 years, five children)

The specific benefits of security and safety were closely related—one often affected the other. That said, gaining a sense of security was more closely related to physical security. Discussions often centred on the ability of assistance services to provide a sense of personal space and a sense of place; this was often how security in the context of homelessness was defined.

'They've got their own bed and bathroom, there are two or three bathrooms, there's a big girls' one and two boys' ones and all that, it's pretty nice like coming from living on the street and some other places I've lived in, it's like absolute bliss.' (Male, 19 years)

'It's bigger. It's more private. Previously the houses were units and there was not much privacy at all, you know. Like, I remember when I first moved into my house a girl told me that when I go into my room to go to bed she could hear me plugging my phone—it makes a beeping noise and she could hear that. So there was no privacy whatsoever.' (Female, 21 years)

Simple pragmatic aspects such as locks on doors or drawers, someone having the courtesy to knock before entering, and a secure space to store personal belongings were often associated with gaining a sense of security. Assistance services were often compared with each other on their ability to provide a sense of security.

'Security and comfort—comfort as in my room being locked, everybody's room is locked and nobody has access to steal—there is less tension here than there was in other places.' (Female, 50 years, three children)

Stability or the ability to ensure a daily or weekly routine was also considered by almost all participants as a key benefit of seeking assistance.

'I have to cook, shop, clean. We get marked every week on our cleaning and we've got to make sure that we eat, and we have to pass a certain amount of tests before I could move in—I had to cook for them and I had to show my cleaning and my budgeting and everything and then they decide if it's appropriate or if I should stay in the refuge for a bit longer. So, they said I was good … I am happy.' (Female, 17 years)

Gaining a sense of stability was a key benefit of seeking help for parents, as it gave them space and time to plan to see their children (if they were not staying with them). Some spoke of the benefits of dedicating specific days of the week to their children, which enabled them to plan activities and put aside the time for their parenting role. Parents also felt that this stability was of benefit to the children. In many cases, children and parents had left extremely disruptive environments, often surrounded by violence, aggression, extreme poverty or drugs and alcohol-related concerns. Seeking assistance allowed stability of routine to be re-introduced to family life—simple things like dinner at a specific time, bed at a specific time; certain activities on certain days were seen as critical in normalising negative experiences for children.

'Ever since I've started taking things in my own hands, I've been trying to do it right. I moved down from Queensland and I wanted to do everything okay for (my child). I didn't want to be jumping from place to place. I just wanted everything to be stable. I am going to stay in this area because I need to for our school.' (Female, 21 years, one child in school)

At a more pragmatic level, accessing homelessness services enabled some parents to successfully petition the court to increase (or gain) access to their children because the routine, safety and stability of the environment was a critical factor in access.

'It's great, I was thinking about it the other day. Like, I have my son and he's able to come and stay with me and so much has come from having that house in the last six months. Like I was living out of a suitcase and I have a home now and that obviously offers great security. It's offered me housing but it's also offered me the position to have my son, we're sort of working towards restoration so it's great peace of mind.' (Female, 30 years, one child, pregnant with second)

Critically, services which ensured that these foundation benefits could be realised laid the platform for greater benefits to be realised. Without meeting these needs it was very difficult for a service to address any of the individual's deeper social and emotional wellbeing issues or the specific vulnerabilities they have accumulated over time.
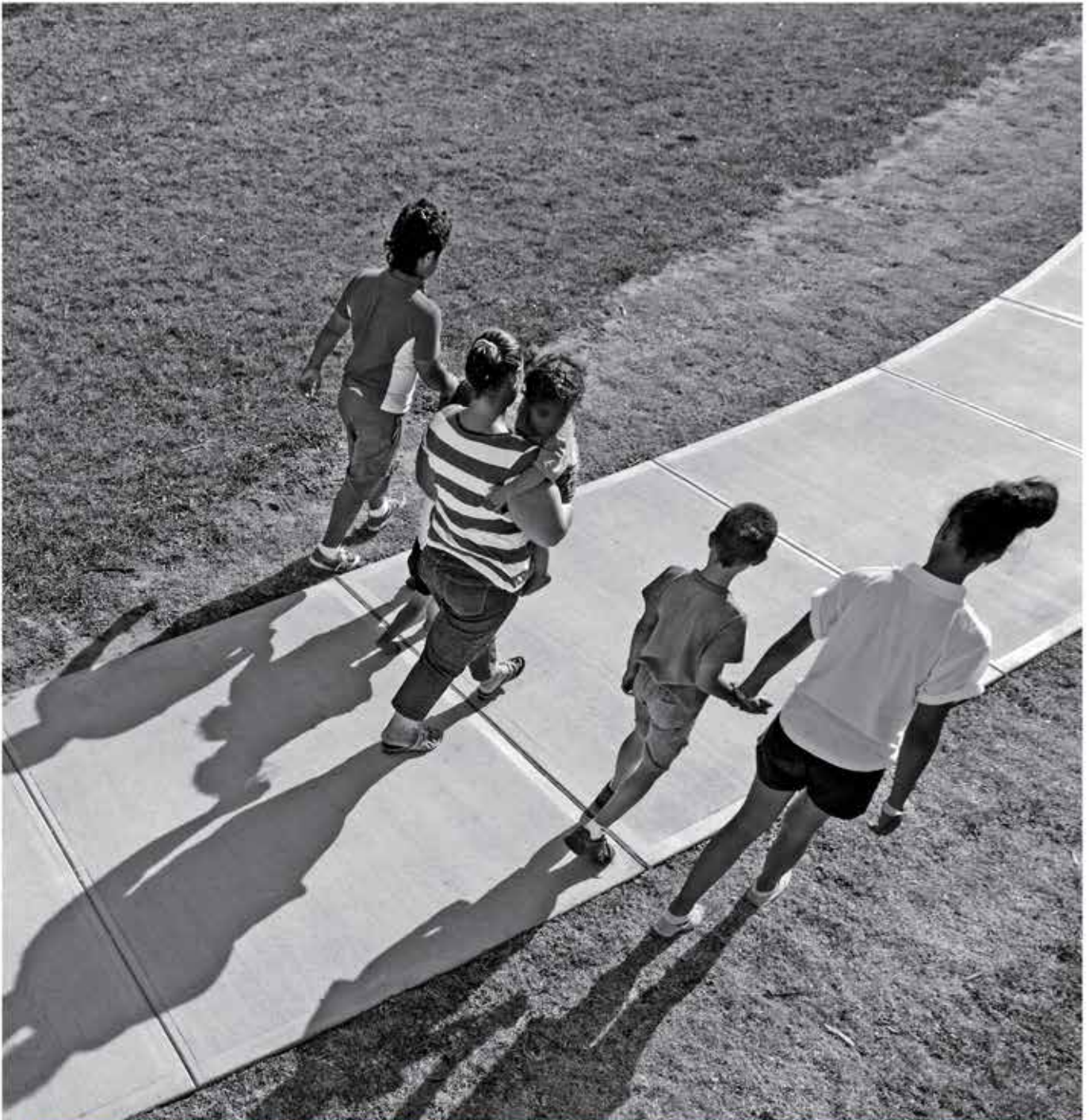
Walking the streets with the kids, looking for a place to live

In 2011, Aia had a challenge. Her husband had left her with six kids and thousands of dollars in debt. She was unsure when she would receive maintenance.

Unable to afford market rent, she was living in Department of Housing accommodation, facing the Department's condition that she search for a rental place of her own. She worked hard to meet the requirement of looking at a minimum seven properties a week. Unable to afford even public transport after the rent was paid, Aia and her children would troop from place to place without success. No-one wants to rent to a mum alone with so many children—and no job.

'It was the hardest thing I could ever imagine,' she said.

Eventually, she was referred to Wesley Mission's crisis accommodation for families, the Noreen Towers Community in western Sydney.

There, she has found a place to live until she finds her feet. She has received counselling and attends parenting classes and budgeting workshops.

The three-bedroom apartment that she shares with her children at the Noreen Towers Community has minimal furniture and bare walls, but it is safe and welcoming until she can find the strength and opportunity to move on.

It's been a difficult journey for Aia, but she said she has turned a corner.

'Every time I used to meet with my Wesley Mission counsellor I cried because I was so angry with my partner,' she said. She now feels happier so she no longer sees the counsellor. However the support Wesley Mission provides continues.

Aia's counsellor suggested she start volunteering as a way for her to create networks in her community and gain experience that could help her get a job.

She now volunteers two days a week at Inspire Community, another organisation that provides services for those in need in Aia's local area. There, she sorts donated clothes and food.

For her the most important thing about volunteering is helping her community.

'I get help and so I also give something back,' she said.

In return for her volunteer work she receives cheap clothes for her children. This is crucial for a family of six children.

The budgeting workshops at the Noreen Towers Community have taught her how to save and understand how she spends her money.

'I live pretty simply and cook every day,' Aia said.

With her eldest daughter in Year 7 and her eldest son starting high school next year, the children themselves have a lot to deal with.

Having to leave the family home last year meant the school-age children had to face all the challenges of changing schools.

> '**It was the hardest thing I could ever imagine,' she said.**

Aia can receive rental support from the Department of Housing but, to do so, she needs to find a three to four-bedroom apartment for not more than $350 per week. In the Sydney rental market this is nearly impossible. Add to that the challenge of finding a place close to the schools her children have now settled into, and it is easy to see the position Aia is in.

In the meantime, the Noreen Tower Community provides plenty of activities for all her children.

The Noreen Towers staff take the children to the local PCYC, the local arts centre and the movies.

Aia is hoping that her volunteering experience will help her get a job in a supermarket that will give her the income to rent a place of her own.

Aia said that before coming to the Noreen Towers Community she had relied on her partner to pay all the bills.

'Noreen Towers has enabled me to rely on myself,' she said. 'And if I have a problem, I can talk with a case worker.'

She remembers one day not being able to buy school lunch for her children. A call to her case worker, however, meant that the children did not go hungry. 'This is an amazing place,' she said.

'You don't have to wait for the case workers to help you. You can go out and do things to make your life better, but it's good to know they are there if you need them.'

Policy and practice implications

The following recommendations result from both the findings from discussions with homeless participants and discussions that took place during the policy and practice workshop in January 2013. Alongside Wesley Mission CEO Keith Garner and service staff, representatives from the following homelessness service providers participated in the workshop; Homelessness NSW, The Salvation Army, Mission Australia, The Haymarket Foundation and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (NSW FaCS).

1.

Homeless families have different needs

The needs of homeless families are not necessarily the same as those of single individuals. As a result, approaches need to be rapid and tailored to their unique needs.

There may be a need for a renewed staff focus on family dynamics and the drivers behind homelessness for families. The continual development of solutions which enable children and their parents to move out of homelessness together and to break the cycle of family homelessness is critical. Strategies discussed include:

• ensuring that service is genuinely client-centric to all the aspects of the entire family and that staff focus on understanding the unique vulnerabilities that homeless families may possess. The approach needs to be genuinely holistic. For many, this was seen as an essential 'back to basics' service approach, not necessarily a reframing of service provision per se. This approach is viewed as fundamental to good service, but is sometimes lost in the pressured environment of a crisis service.

• the provision of continual staff education and awareness-raising activities which focus on the unique needs of families, children and the whole family dynamic particularly where staff turnover may be high (for example, in the NGO sector).

• greater efforts to foster relationships between Specialist Homeless Service providers and family support services with the aim of assisting a family's move out of homelessness and addressing some of the specific challenges facing families.

2.

The erosion of trust and respect over many years must be overcome before problems can be addressed

Underpinning many of the issues associated with homelessness was a deep distrust of services and a lack of willingness to engage. This was particularly the case for those who had first been homeless at an early age. To overcome this, a renewed focus on building trust and demonstrating respect through service interaction is critical. Trust and respect were seen to be reinforced by the factors addressed below.

Secure environment

Everyday accommodation facilities with single/private lockable rooms/units. Lockable storage areas respect the privacy of the individual and assist with securing longer-term accommodation by building trust between the service and clients.

Positive staff attitude

Respect given was often seen to result in respect earned. Reinforcement of the importance of building strong relationships with clients was seen as critical. This included actions such as:

- respecting personal space, such as knocking on doors before entering
- flexibility of service delivery, e.g. ensuring that case-workers were able to work around court dates for child access, rather than expecting clients to miss dates to spend time with a case-worker

- respect, honesty and accountability between the workers and their clients e.g. ensuring that case-workers did not keep clients waiting without an explanation or apology
- assertive engagement and genuine interest in the wellbeing of the families, e.g. periodically checking in with clients and not waiting for them to approach the service.

Seamless transition

Trust is often lost when a client moves from one service to another—relationships with case-workers are lost, stories need to be re-told and clients can feel abandoned by a trusted advisor. Focusing on continuity of service and relationships during a time of transition (for example, from crisis accommodation to social housing) is critical in ensuring that trust is not lost and clients remain connected to care providers.

Policy and practice changes

Review all policies and procedures that directly affect families and facilitate an understanding of the people who will have to live through these procedures, e.g. consulting people with 'lived experience' to review policies and procedures to point out how they might be improved so that people aren't unwittingly isolated and mistrust reinforced.

'Reinforcing the importance of building strong relationships with clients was seen as critical.'

3.

Complex family needs require an inter-connected approach

Multiple vulnerabilities and the breakdown of parent/child relationships need multi-disciplined solutions. This streamlining and integration of service can be enhanced by:

Greater interagency or community connectedness

Stronger cross-agency linkages mean a greater understanding by homelessness services of other services and options available to families in a local area. Greater knowledge sharing, collaboration and discussion between services providers (both NGO and government) is critical in addressing the complex needs associated with family homelessness and could include:

- sharing of research and insight into the homeless population or evaluations of services
- knowledge-sharing to identify best practice servicing strategies and options for families and young people
- engaging other community agencies (e.g. local churches, playgroups, support groups) to link the families into the local area, beyond the walls of the homelessness programs

Shared information platforms

Telling and retelling stories erodes trust and often results in a lack of full disclosure. Shared information platforms between different services might go some way to reducing the anxiety caused by multiple story-telling. Obviously, privacy issues associated with the sharing or transfer of data (such as case files) will need to be considered as part of any alterations to service.

4.

Homeless families need to be able to access appropriate social housing

Discussions with stakeholders indicate that much of the housing stock in NSW is single or partnered in nature (studio or one-bedroom). This is believed to be the result of a focus on the ageing population and predicted future social housing needs for singles. Most felt that there were very few options for medium to large-sized families.

As a result, it might be necessary to recognise this demand and review the existing housing stock.

Altering current stock to accommodate families (including adjusting the internal structure of dwellings to accommodate a greater number of bedrooms) was discussed as a potential short-term solution.

Accommodation also needs to be appropriate for single people who are homeless and require tailored solutions as a result of their physical or mental vulnerabilities (e.g. high-rise provision being inappropriate for someone who has a phobia of heights). Rejecting inappropriate options often leads to increased stress related to a fear of exclusion from future public housing options.

Housing needs to understand the complexity of the modern family dynamic. This includes single fathers, parents with either shared access or intermediate access of their children, and extended families that might include aunties, uncles and elderly relatives etc.

Housing providers need to understand the complexity of the modern family dynamic. This includes single fathers, parents with either shared access or intermediate access of their children, and extended families that might include aunts, uncles and elderly relatives.

Appendix A

Summary of literature review

Women are more likely to seek homelessness support services than men, and families comprise a significant proportion of those seeking help

A review of the findings of the recent Specialist Homelessness Services Report (AIHW, 2012) reveals that women are more likely to seek homelessness services than men. Across Australia in 2011–2012, nearly 230,000 clients received assistance from agencies. Of these, 59 per cent of all presentations were women, 41 per cent were men.

While most people seeking help and assistance presented alone (67 per cent), family presentations comprised almost one-third (32 per cent) of all those seeking help in 2011–2012. Of all family presentations, 74 per cent were single parents with children and 16 per cent were couples with children.

Children are likely to stay with their mothers, meaning more than a single individual is affected when a mother becomes homeless

While there are a number of different factors that contribute to homelessness and there is debate about whether specific elements are causes or effects of homelessness (for example, mental health issues), domestic violence and societal gender roles are considered to have a significant impact on female homelessness. More than three quarters of clients who sought assistance as a result of experiencing domestic violence (34 per cent of all clients) were female and most were aged between 18 and 34 (67 per cent) years of age.

To escape violence (both physical and psychological), women are forced to leave their homes and frequently take their children with them to protect them from any further victimisation or violence. Findings from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC) data indicate that most families seeking support were headed by females in the age group 25–44 years, and that children aged 0–14 represented more than half (55 per cent) of all family unit presentations.

Mothers and their children experience cyclical homelessness and this has a potential longer-term impact on childhood development

Homeless families tend to have relatively short episodes of homelessness and can drift in and out of temporary accommodations and shelters (Boyd et al., 2003; Weitzman et al., 1999; Ouellette & Toro, 2002). Women and their children who escape from domestic violence might often return to the perpetrator numerous times, which creates a cycle of short episodes of homelessness. Cyclical homelessness for mothers and their children is often underpinned by the increased risk of assault and abuse that females face when on the street.

The experience of homelessness has the potential to have long-term and significant consequences on childhood development. Demonstrated negative impacts include effects on educational attainment, mental health, physical health, social relationships and social functioning. That said, in some cases children may see homelessness as being positive, with the experience being viewed as a holiday from the everyday and a chance to escape those negative experiences which underpin homelessness (for example, family violence or extreme poverty).

While there is some evidence to indicate that a homeless episode as a child can result in homelessness as an adult, at this stage limited research exists

Currently, little Australian evidence exists to demonstrate a direct causal effect between childhood homelessness and adult homelessness. Several studies have researched the impact of childhood homelessness with homeless adults, with these studies concluding that childhood experiences could have an impact on adulthood homelessness.

Appendix B

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Wesley Mission provides a wide range of services for the homeless and for those at risk of becoming homeless. More than 600 people are cared for and accommodated each day through safe and secure, short to medium-term accommodation and support services to individuals, families, the elderly and young people.

Accommodation for individuals

Edward Eagar Lodge

Edward Eagar Lodge provides crisis accommodation for homeless men and women over the age of 18 for up to three months. Additional services include case management, a community church for the homeless, and transitional accommodation and programmed support for homeless families.

Community Housing

The Community Housing program aims to provide a range of medium-term accommodation options as the next step on from hostel accommodation. This allows clients—both men and women—to progress towards independent living with dignity, privacy and security and self-worth.

Newcastle Accommodation and Welfare Services

The Newcastle Accommodation program is aimed at providing affordable low-cost medium-term housing to clients identified as homeless or at risk of homelessness. The program provides a supportive environment working with clients to identify and eliminate any barriers they may have to finding and maintaining long-term accommodation.

Accommodation for families

Short-term units

The Short Term Unit program at Carlingford is one of very few that can accommodate families consisting of couples with children, sole fathers and large families.

Noreen Towers Community

The Noreen Towers Community is a response to the high rate of homeless families with children in the Liverpool area. Working with Community Services and the Department of Housing, Wesley Mission has created an innovative community that combines access to family accommodation with family support and group work services.

Homeless support for young people

Independent Living Programs

Wesley Mission's Independent Living Programs provide medium-term accommodation for young people, 16 to 22 years, who are unable to reside at home and are motivated to live independently. Young people entering these programs have generally lived in various types of accommodation for a period of time, or are out of their homes for the first time. The programs are also an excellent starting place for young families who need assistance to move into independent living.

Homeless support for the elderly

Greenacre Supported Housing

The Greenacre service provides permanent accommodation to the elderly who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged

The Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) Program is designed to assist the homeless or people in insecure housing to find more appropriate housing with care options.

Case management

Through case management, Wesley Mission offers an additional level of support to clients of Edward Eagar Lodge who want to exit the cycle of homelessness. We provide support services while staying at the lodge, supported pathways out of homelessness, and then support to sustain housing and improve wellbeing.

Alongside our homelessness services, Wesley Mission family and counselling services provide support to families to help them avoid situations that could lead to homelessness.

Get involved

To volunteer, donate or leave a bequest visit wesleymission.org.au/getinvolved

Wesley Mission services

For over 200 years our commitment to our Christian faith has driven us to create long-term holistic solutions that address the needs of the whole person, not just their current challenges.

Wesley Child & Family

Wesley Youth

Wesley Seniors

Wesley Congregational Life

Wesley Mental Health Services

Wesley Alcohol, Drug & Gambling Services

Wesley Counselling Services

Wesley Homeless Services

Wesley Employment, Training & Conferences

Wesley Disability Services

Wesley Carer Services

Wesley Help at Home Services

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